UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CONF.91/INF/7
23 December 1997

ENGLISH ONLY

SEVENTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE
ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
New York, 13-22 January 1998
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE SIXTH CONFERENCE

Report of the United States of America

Paper submitted by the United States of America**

* E/CONF.91/1

** Prepared by Roger L. Payne, United States Geological Survey

97-37943

Report of the United States of America
Activities Since the Sixth Conference

Introduction

The United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) was established by Executive Order in 1890 to resolve inconsistencies and contradiction of spelling and application resulting from mapping and scientific reports associated with exploration, mining, and settlement of the western part of the United States. In 1947 the Board was re-organized when the U.S. Congress established the Board by Public Law 80-242. The work of the Board is primarily divided between two standing Committees and two Advisory Committees. The Domestic Names Committee and the Foreign Names Committee have been empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Board while the Advisory Committees, made up of advisors and experts, make recommendations to the Board for decision. All decisions of the Board are subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Interior, who is by law, conjointly responsible for standardizing geographic nomenclature throughout the Federal government. The research and support staff for the Domestic Names Committee (DNC) and the Advisory Committee for Antarctic Names (ACAN) is provided by the U.S. Geological Survey while the research and support staff for the Foreign Names Committee (FNC) and Advisory Committee for Undersea Features (ACUF) is provided by the National Imagery and Mapping Agency.

Foreign Names Activities Since the Sixth Conference

The significant activities have been concentrated on digital database development and publications. Specifically in 1993 the Geographic Names Processing System was implemented and made operational. This database contains approximately four million entries for foreign geographical names and spellings as well as related information. During 1994 the GEOnet Names Server was activated providing access to the foreign names database on the World Wide Web. Users may search the database by feature name (including diacritical marks in some cases), country, type of feature, and minimum bounded rectangle created by geographical coordinates. Users also have access to a user's manual and information about the U.S. Board.

The publication program for foreign names included distribution of more than 20 revised conventional gazetteers of foreign countries. This program has slowed somewhat because of increased use of digital files, but is still active. Also, conventional reports are available as needed and digital files are also available. In 1994, the staff revised for publication Romanization Systems and Roman - Script Spelling Conventions which is used throughout the Federal government as the standard for establishing standardized Roman-script spellings of those foreign geographical names that are written in non-Roman scripts or in Roman alphabets that contain special letters.

The ACUF received over 500 proposals, mostly from within the United States, for naming undersea features outside the bounds of sovereignty of any nation. Most of these names were approved and are official for use on Federal maps and documents.

Domestic Names Activities Since the Sixth Conference

The domestic program for standardizing names has established and refined various principles, policies, and procedures over the years. The third version of the publication that defines and explains these rules and regulations and entitled Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names was published in 1997. The domestic names staff maintains a library of toponymic literature and historical as well as current maps. Using these resources, the staff can often assist organizations and individuals with various inquiries regarding geographical names. Since 1992, the domestic staff received and responded to more than 30,000 such inquiries. Also, the geographic names office received more than 2,000 proposals to change the form or application of a name, or to establish a name for an otherwise unnamed feature. The Domestic Names Committee rendered decisions on more than 1,500 controversial and problematic names during the past five years in accordance with the national program for standardizing geographical names.

The Committee also addressed various issues of policy including the approval of a new policy regarding Native American (indigenous) names. The use of all diacritical marks in geographical names within the jurisdiction of the United States is now allowed on a case-by-case basis. Specifically, cases are considered on a case-by-case basis since local use and acceptance is still the paramount policy in considering name changes or the approval of names for unnamed features. Also, the Commemorative Naming Policy was amended to require that a person now be deceased for at least five years rather than one year before such a proposal may be considered.

The Committee adopted the report and recommendation of its Scope and Purview Subcommittee which after considerable deliberation determined that the official names of certain types of features categorized as administrative should be the responsibility of the organization responsible for administration of those features. Examples of such features include parks, schools, churches, cemeteries, shopping centers, etc. (see Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names distributed as a separate paper). The Board's domestic names policies do not now apply to these feature types, however, the Committee will serve as arbiter for names disputes regarding administrative names if asked to do so. The Committee has relaxed somewhat its lack of willingness to review and even approve proposals containing an apostrophe used in the genitive case. The Committee also re-affirmed its position that providing a guide to pronunciation is not part of the program to standardize geographical names, nor is of use to the Federal government. The Committee also re-affirmed that it does not want to implement an "insignificant" feature policy nor does it reject proposals to name ephemeral features citing that especially regarding digital, thematic mapping there could be a need to show such features such as lakes created by retreating glaciers, shoals in streams, and other similar features.

Of paramount importance to the Committee in analyzing controversies and name proposals for unnamed features, is local use and acceptance. To coordinate local opinions and recommendations as well as to foster recommendations on behalf of State governments, which is crucial to the standardization process, the Committee encourages the establishment and active participation of State Names Authorities. This network assures coordination of local preference and that maps and other products at the local, State, and Federal levels use the official standard form of feature names. Since 1992, nine States have formed State Names Authorities bringing the current total to 42 States with such an organization (see map with separate paper).

The extensive geographical names data compilation program has proceeded on schedule. Compilation of geographical names from most Federal maps was completed by 1984, but this included only about 30 percent of the known names. In order to offer an official geographical names database that is as complete as possible, a comprehensive data compilation project was authorized and is to be completed on a State-by-State basis. Prior to 1992, 18 States and the District of Columbia had completed the extensive compilation phase. Since 1992, contracts to compile data in 26 States have been awarded, and these projects have thus far been completed in 12 of those States. The remaining States are still in progress. Compilation for each State requires about four years, and presently only six States and territories have not begun this project (see status map in separate paper). As a result of this program of data compilation, more than 400,000 additional geographical names have been added to the database.

The publication program since 1992 has been very active and has become highly diversified. The formal publication of conventional State gazetteers has been temporarily suspended pending an evaluation of cost and demand especially with the variety of digital products now available. However, conventional gazetteers are still available as a "print-on-demand" product as are special listings generated by user request. Three releases of the Digital Gazetteer of the United States (compact disc) have been made since 1992 with each version containing over 200,000 new entries more than the previous version. Each version contains software utilized in searching, retrieving, analyzing, arranging, and exporting the data. The present version was issued in December 1996, and the next version will be released in mid-1998. The next version will include more than 13,000 names in Antarctica approved for use on Federal maps and documents. The Board's Publication Catalog (see separate paper) was published and distributed. The catalog provides a list and descriptive comments regarding all products foreign and domestic, digital and conventional, authorized by the Board. The Committee also released in 1997 the third version of Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names reflecting policy and procedure changes since 1989. The latest version of the gazetteer of Antarctica was published in 1995 (see separate paper) and features about 1,000 additional entries since the 1980 edition. The ACAN considered approximately 500 new proposals since 1992, and these names have been approved for use on Federal maps and documents.

The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) which is the official, automated repository for geographical names in the United States has been made available on the World Wide Web. In 1996 the prototype site was launched, and since has been made fully operational and enhanced several times as responses to user requirements were implemented. The site provides information about the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, and the data compilation program as well as digital versions of the Domestic Names Committee's principles, policies, and procedures and the user's guide to the database. There is a form allowing a fully searchable function of the database, and one may also associate retrieved entries with three different graphic displays showing national and regional location along with other named entries for reference as well as a third display showing location within the associated drainage basin or watershed. One may "download" standard gazetteers of the various States and territories, and may order products as well. There are also direct links to the U.S. foreign names site as well as similar sites in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. More links will be established.

International Activities

Members of the U.S. Board's executive staff have had the privilege to be invited and to represent the Board at meetings of various other bodies involved in national standardization. Such meetings ranged from active participation to observer status and included the International Hydrographic Organization in 1993 and 1997, and the Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research in 1996. The U.S. Board participates with the British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names in biannual conferences on issues of common interest, and held such meetings in 1994 and 1996. The U.S. Board is represented as an observer at the annual meeting of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN). Other meetings included an international conference on the Romanization of Ukrainian in 1993, and an international symposium on toponymic data files in 1995. Representatives of the U.S. Board's staff also were invited to attend some Divisional meetings of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). These included the Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division meeting in 1995; and the Baltic Division meetings in 1995 and 1997. Further, there has been collaboration and meaningful exchange with the Latin American Division and the Asia Southeast and Pacific Southwest Division.

The U.S. Board has actively sponsored a training program and has participated in other training programs supported by UNGEGN. Specifically, the course in applied toponomy offered to member nations of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) was offered in a different host, member nation in 1993, 1995, 1996, and 1997. There was also participation in a session on standardization of geographical names in Kiev, Ukraine in 1995; an advanced training course offered in Pretoria, South Africa in 1995; and a seminar on geographical names standardization in Riga, Latvia in 1997. There was a visit in 1997 to observe and exchange procedures with the Australian national government as well as the governments of the Australian States of New South Wales and Victoria.

Summary

The period since the Sixth Conference has been very active for both foreign and domestic activity of the U.S. Board. A good deal of resources were allocated to developing world wide web sites for both domestic and foreign names databases. Both sites are searchable and very active. Additional resources were allocated to revising publications and developing digital products. Publications include those dealing with domestic policy, Romanization, names in Antarctica, gazetteers of foreign areas, and data user's guides.

Domestic names activity also included a complete examination of policies culminating in one new policy, some major and minor revisions, and re-affirmation to existing policies. In the United States, the program of comprehensive data compilation continued on schedule with active work in over 25 States during the period since the Sixth Conference. There was very active development and enhancement of the course in applied toponomy offered under the auspices of PAIGH, and there was much collaboration with other organizations in various training symposia and courses including Ukraine, South Africa, and the Baltic region. Representatives of the Board attended various national and international meetings and conferences as participants and observers.